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ABSTRACT

An alternative curriculum program, a School-to-Work Transition Academy, has the potential to assist secondary special education students in developing workplace skills, knowledge, and competencies. Major elements are as follows: a collaborative team of special, regular, and career/technology teachers; advisory committee; transition-specific, competency-based curriculum that integrates computer applications with all curricula concepts; academics presented through contextual, authentic teaching strategies; and performance-based, authentic student assessments. Student placement is determined by student and parent interviews and career interests, aptitude, and achievement assessments. The transition curriculum is an integrated, circular continuum of academic skills, career/employability skills, and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills competencies. Academic core content is organized into five coherent, sequential, competency-based strands: applied communications, applied mathematics, life management education, applied solutions, and career and employability skills. Mastery of specified core content competencies is the prerequisite for entering the local high school's Career and Technology Work Programs or Special Education Vocational Work Program. Teachers act as facilitators of activity-based, applied learning pedagogy. Other aspects of the academy are business partnerships, attendance standards, effort standards, and community-based learning opportunities. (20 references) (YLB)

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Transition Academy:
An Alternative School-to-Work High School Curriculum

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Transition Academy: An Alternative School-to-Work High School Curriculum

The school-to-work (STW) movement's goal is to engage all youth in the lifelong acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to pursue meaningful challenging and productive career pathways; all students are expected to graduate with skills sufficient to enter and complete postsecondary education and/or postsecondary training programs [Texas Employment (Workforce) Commission, 1994]. The characteristics of effective Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) transition programs are similar to those emphasized by the School-to-Work Opportunities Act; but frequently, the priority decision at Individual Educational Planning (IEP) meetings is where (the location) students will be sent or placed. Discussions seldom focus upon the need for a sequence of interconnected learning objectives (curricula) that will contribute to the student's specific career and adult-life outcomes. Often, at high school IEP meetings, a short list of course titles, selected from the school's current course offering booklet, are shown to the student and/or parent and identified as possible courses. Students and parents then simply make somewhat random choices. Many exemplary at-risk recovery programs' curricula are now shifting the focus away from long-standing academic deficits and toward current skill needs and the future life demands of employability and transition to adulthood. This approach appears to be especially appropriate for special education students who have not been successful in the regular education program (Edgar & Polloway, 1994).

The remainder of this paper proposes an alternative high school content program for special education students adapted from the school-within-a-school, academy model [National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE), 1994].

The School-to-Work Transition Academy

Goal: All of our students will graduate with the skills necessary to enter either postsecondary educational programs, postsecondary training programs, or the job market in their chosen career cluster/career pathway.

Major Elements:

- A collaborative team of special, regular, and career/technology teachers who share the Academy students and a common planning period.
- A group of high school special education students who are identified as School-to-Work Transition Academy students.
- The Academy is considered an instructional option for delivering special education services.

- Academy teachers and students have full access and connections with all high school personnel, services, and activities.
- Campus administrators, counselors, teachers, and assessment personnel are available to provide needed assistance and support.
- The Academy has a STW Academy Advisory Committee which represents a diverse, cross-section of community, school administration, parent, teacher, and student leaders. These leaders participate actively in the Academy's program.
- The curriculum is transition-specific and competency-based and integrates computer applications with all curricula concepts and topics.
- Academics are presented through contextual, authentic teaching strategies.
- Students demonstrate their competencies through activity-based, applied learning activities and teachers manage the instruction as facilitators or guides.
- The Academy students are expected to meet school attendance standards.
- The Academy students are expected to meet effort standards.
- The Academy students will have many community-based learning opportunities.
- The Academy students will show mastery of the curriculum objectives through performance-based, authentic assessments. Results will be maintained in individual competency portfolios until graduation and will provide employability documentation for the student.

Student Acceptance Procedures

Students and parents will be provided data regarding the Academy's alternative curricula when it has been determined that graduation will be based upon IEP completion. The following student data will be used in determining student placement: student interview, parent interview, career interests, career/transition skills and aptitude assessments, classroom performance, state standardized core-curriculum competencies and standardized, norm-referenced achievement assessments, IEP committee recommendations, and transition plan goals.

Transition-Specific, Competency-Based Curricula

The transition curricula proposed here is an integrated, circular, continuum of academic skills, career/employability skills, and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) competencies [Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), 1991]. The SCANS skills and competencies will be integrated into all Academy courses by all of the Academy's teachers through classroom management procedures and teaching and learning strategies. The curricula will be presented over a three to five year (high school) period and with each additional year, Academy

students will be required to demonstrate higher standards. The total amount of years as a Transition Academy student will vary and will be determined by student need and IEP Committee recommendations

Competency-based curricula require demonstrating the application of the content standards and does not grant credit based upon time spent in the classrooms covering the content. The academic core curriculum will be defined specific to the literacy and employability skills required by the local community's entry-level jobs. The Academy teachers will collaborate with local employers in order to identify the technical aspects of the actions a learner demonstrates in a functional job setting and to identify the prerequisite (academic) skills and knowledge required by job tasks. The teachers will transfer this task analysis data into classroom learning assignments.

The proposed academic core content is organized into five coherent, sequential, competency-based strands:

- Applied Communications, applications of the reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills found in the workplace.
- Applied Mathematics, applications of computation and mathematical problem-solving skills.
- Life Management Education, development of transferable skills that assure success in family, work settings, and the community.
- Applied Solutions, development of mental habits (meta-cognition), construction of meaning/knowledge, analytical thinking/reasoning, and management of one's own learning.
- Career and Employability Skills, development of the skills to acquire, organize, evaluate, and interpret information in implementing career path decisions; describing careers that involve working for self and others; and the integration of employability skills into behaviors that result in obtaining, maintaining, and advancing in employment. Knowledge and skills common to a group or cluster of related industries and occupations will be integrated into the academy's curriculum as collaborations with campus career/technology teachers and partnerships with community businesses are developed. Students will have an opportunity to learn about the laws, procedures and resources that will be available to them as disabled adults.

Students will remain in these strands until their performance(s) indicate mastery, as described by the core content performance criterias and the individual student's IEP. Mastery of the specified core content competencies will be the

prerequisite for entering one of the local high school's Career and Technology Cooperative Work Programs or the Special Education Vocational Work Program.

Activity-Based, Applied Learning Pedagogy and Teachers as Facilitators

Activity-based, applied learning pedagogy promotes concrete/hands-on activities that use real-world materials and solve routine or novel problems that might be encountered outside of a high school setting. Students team with other classmates in small groups for the major part of instructional time. Teachers model or demonstrate an activity or act as a coach, facilitator or guide for the students and gradually diminish their directives, as student mastery increases.

Business Partnerships

Linkages to businesses and their personnel are strengthened through site and classroom visits that facilitate student interest and motivation. The school and the businesses join together in the pursuit of opportunities that will benefit them both. One example is curriculum writing; educators and business persons sitting at the same table to design content that will promote the kinds of learning that employers value. With a dynamic partnership one would expect frequent communications and visits between all partners. As the relationships grow, a wide range of connections will be established; one of which might be job-shadowing opportunities for the Academy teachers and students.

Attendance Standards

Students will be asked to meet attendance expectations similar to those found in the workplace. The guidelines will need to be developed by the Academy's teachers, students, parents, and local business representatives and approved by the school's administrator.

Effort Standards

Students will be encouraged to demonstrate personal pride and growth as an Academy member. The Academy teachers will implement procedures and arrange furniture and tasks that are similar to business environments, as well as model business interpersonal skills, work behaviors, and team-building skills. Students will be considered young adults and will be expected to demonstrate appropriate work behaviors while at school. If students have difficulty displaying adult work habits, many positive reteaching strategies will be activated; but if success is not accomplished within the Academy, the student(s) will be referred to the IEP Committee so that alternative content and goals may be considered.

Community-Based Learning Opportunities

As our school-business partnership relationships grow, there will be increased awareness in the community that our students need opportunities at real work-based learning stations. The Academy staff will visit in the community and arrange field trips to businesses and organizations with the purpose of networking. Employment specialists/job coaches will be hired and trained to provide the necessary on-the-job education and support for the School-to-Work Academy students.

Conclusions

This alternative curriculum program, a School-to-Work Transition Academy, has the potential to assist secondary special education students in developing workplace skills, knowledge, and competencies. Successful transition from school to the adult world and employment will depend upon integrating thelocal community's and the local educators' expectations for their students and then both groups providing the necessary on-going support and resources.

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